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This paper explores the underlying philosophies, research and artistic context to the artworks *The Presence of Absence*, *Family Tree*, *Apart/Together*, and *Family Home* included in the MFA thesis exhibition at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, April through June 2015. My work draws from major themes of memory, family, time, history, and ideas regarding place and spirituality.

LIKE THIS YOU WILL LIVE ON FOREVER:
MEMORY, THE KEEPSAKE AND
THE PHOTOGRAPH

by

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Committee Chair

For Grace Viola Zhe

Thank you for helping to instill in me the importance of family, charity, love and understanding. I love you always

APPROVAL PAGE

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PREFACE

“There I was, alone in the apartment that she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under a lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it.”

-Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I am an interdisciplinary conceptual artist working with a broad range of media including photography, drawing, sculpture, and installation. I find inspiration through my own experiences of the world and make work of an innately personal nature. I accept and embrace the challenges of choosing to use myself and my life as subject matter. Working autobiographically is the only way that I have found to process and understand my experience and, in turn, put something of my experience back out into the world. My work draws from major themes of memory, family, time, history, and ideas regarding place and spirituality.

The specificity of material is important in my work. Most of my material choices are directly linked to the concept of each individual artwork. This emphasis on material specificity has led to continuous experimentation in various technical and artistic processes. Fusing material and concept has required that the work be minimalist in its presentation so that each work may be pared down to its most crucial elements.

The term “minimalist” is used to describe a mode of art-making prominent in the 1960s known for its severe, geometric configurations and its emphasis on industrial processes and materials to explore concepts of space and systemic modes of production. Minimalism opened the way for the process and performance oriented works of the 1980s, including that of the Cuban-born artist, Felix Gonzales-Torres. Although Torres’

approach and personal influences are different from my own, I desire, just as he did, for a specificity in materials that can communicate an intensely personal message.

Torres' work addressed his personal experiences of loss and anger in the midst of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980's. He had lost his partner of eight years to the disease and eventually succumbed to the illness himself. I was immediately taken with the simplicity and directness he achieved both in his photographs and installations. Although most of the installations were comprised of a single, almost always ephemeral material, the specificity of each material choice served to further enhance the work's capacity to communicate the love and loss that he himself had experienced. They also allude to the existence of a communal, spiritual afterlife, in that the entire artwork slowly dissolves as the pieces it is comprised of are picked up and carried away by gallery visitors. The substances making up the installation no longer remain in the gallery, but are distributed among those who partake of the exhibition.

The majority of his photography was in black and white. The images usually only contained one or two elements and were displayed as renewable stacks of print reproductions intended for distribution to his audiences. By cropping the images to fully contain his intended subject, Torres was able to condense the subject matter of his photos to emphasize their intended message. The photos that I found most compelling were those included in his book entitled "A Selection of Photographs Taken by Felix Gonzales-Torres." The book contained a variety of color snapshots Torres had taken that were paired with hand-written inscriptions. The images and text read as quick poetic gestures conveying his thoughts on love, desire, home, family, pets, and hope. They

reminded me of my own family snapshots that I value so much. I felt as though by sharing his most intimate and personal thoughts and feelings he was able to create a space for those looking in to access their own personal memories. This action allowed for a personal communion between himself and the world. His work gave me the desire to experiment with my own ephemera in search of ways to make them refer directly and powerfully to my own personal experience. Torres' work also opened my eyes to the possibility of different levels of outside participation to further emphasize spirituality and the passage of time. I began to focus on the ways in which we attempt to record our own personal experiences throughout our existence and the processes we use in the attempt to preserve our identities and our personal narratives through images and objects.

I rely on the use of multiple types of light in my work. I use light for its technical and metaphorical possibilities. Much of my work is intended only to function with an electrically operated light source. In many cases the technical and metaphorical operate interdependently. Electrically powered light depends on its electrical source to function, in much the same way as many of our own bodily processes are governed by electrical impulses, and it is that electricity which keeps our bodies alive. It also remains essential to how we think, feel, and remember.

The *Heart Archive* by artist Christian Boltanski functions in this way. He began this work in 2005 when he first recorded his own heart beat. One single exposed light bulb hung in the middle of a gallery in a Paris exhibition. It had been synchronized to flicker in exact time to the beating of his heart. Adjacent to the pulsing bulb was a projected image of the artist's face as a child. The image slowly morphed into several

different photographs of the artist in slow progression, serving as markers for different life stages. The pulsing light bulb served to reinforce the accelerated aging process recorded in the shifting images. The pairing of the light and projected photographs emphasizes the passage of time and the ephemerality of life. I find the analogy between biological processes and the mechanical components of light and electricity something that I come back to often in my work.

CHAPTER II

MEMORY AND THE PHOTOGRAPH

Memory is the overarching theme of my work. Past memories play a major role in how we experience, understand and interact with the world in the present. Photographs have always served as a way for me to connect to specific places and times within my own memory. As so famously demonstrated by Roland Barthes “Winter Garden” photograph, the personal memories that photographs elicit cannot be communicated to any other viewer. In the absence of other information, a photo only captures what is directly in front of the camera. As time passes and memory fades, all that exists outside the visual confines of the image is lost.

For example, I have a photo of me and my grandmother sitting together in her living room when I was little. I remember that the couch we are sitting on had an old musty smell. I remember the rough texture of the fabric and the way it felt on my skin when my grandmother would make up a bed for me there when I slept over. I remember a time when I couldn’t sleep alone because I was scared of the dark. My grandmother would lie down with me in her arms in the spare bedroom and rock her body back and forth by shaking her foot off of the side of the bed until I fell asleep. I remember the shirt that my grandmother was wearing. It smelled faintly of her rose perfume, as did all of the clothes she allowed me to use when playing dress up. I remember standing before the

mirror viewing myself in the oversized clothes and wishing that I were big enough to wear them. The photo evokes a world of childhood far beyond the limits of the frame.

I had come across the photo in a stack of pictures I was sorting through one day while I was still unpacking. Moving to Greensboro was a difficult transition for me. I had lived on my own for many years, but never this far away from my family and my friends. I felt lost and alone as I struggled to find where I fit within my new environment during my first semester. Looking at the photo, I thought about my grandmother and how she would call at least three times a week to make sure that I was safe and had everything I needed. Growing up she had always been there to look out for me. When we were together I was never far from her side. Here in this new place I desperately wished the phone would ring and it would be her calling to reassure me that everything would be alright. In that moment, looking at those photos of us together made her feel farther away than she ever had.

This photo was inspiration for a work entitled *The Presence of Absence* that was included in the Weatherspoon exhibition. It, and two other photos of me and my grandmother stand three inches from the gallery wall. In each image, my grandmother is physically removed, leaving a void in the photo where she had been. Overhead gallery lights create a cast shadow on the wall underneath each photo. The shadows create secondary images depicting my grandmother's lit silhouette within a dark plain. Where there is light there will always be shadow. Both light and shadow contribute to our perception of the space around us and our location within it. This inseparable connection

between light and dark speaks to certain notions of life and death for me, as well as the concept of an afterlife and spirituality.

CHAPTER III

FAMILY TREE

Growing up, my life was full of chaos and uncertainty. My parents and I moved from place to place as my mom and dad attempted to situate themselves within the world. I excitedly anticipated visits to my grandmother and grandfather's house. They lived together for over fifty years on family property in upstate New York. Set back in the woods bordering a small town, it was a place where time seemed to stand still. When I would feel like the world around me was out of my control, my grandparent's house provided a sense of warmth and security.

My grandmother was a warm and loving woman who dedicated her life to her family. She worked hard to keep all of us connected and was always happiest when we were together. She loved all of her children and grandchildren with equal intensity and adoration. Holidays were always big events. Our entire family would come to town and squeeze in to their one story house for an entire week. Almost all of my happy childhood memories derive from those visits to my grandmother's.

When my grandmother died in 2005 everything changed. The house that was once a place filled with love and fond memories suddenly felt sterile and hollow. My grandmother's wake was the last occasion to bring us together at the house. Even though my grandfather still lives there, our family has grown apart. When I visit, I find myself somewhere between what used to be and what now is.

This past Christmas I went home to visit family. It was the first time in two and a half years. I arranged to stay with my grandfather for the majority of my holiday. None of my other family members could make it for Christmas, so the house was empty other than my Grandfather, his second wife, and myself. His recent health problems had left him tired and weak. He and his wife spent a great deal of time at rest in their rocking chairs nodding off to re-runs of *Grand ol' Opry* and *Hee-Haw*. While they slept, I became preoccupied with thoughts of previous Christmases and how full of noise and excitement the house had been when my Grandmother was still here. One afternoon I decided to start sorting through boxes of family photos I had found in the basement. I initial began looking for pictures of past Christmases. I had to find a way to organize the numerous photos. I started separating images by the room that each of them had been taken in. There was a separate stack for pictures taken outside the house. A small black and white photo caught my attention. It was a picture of my grandmother when she was young. She was standing in front of the tree that stands off of the back porch. She was holding my eldest uncle when he was a baby. The tree in the back yard had grown over twenty-five feet high since that photo had been taken. It was a strange sensation to find myself able to view the sapling and the huge pine it had become in the same moment. I noticed that almost all of the pictures taken outside of the house included this same tree. My grandparents and the tree had lived and grown side by side for almost their entire lives. As the tree had grown taller and stronger, my grandparents aged and grew weaker. The tree had been a silent witness to all of our lives as we had been an unwitting witness to the tree. It had outlived my grandmother as it would my grandfather, and eventually

myself. Without intervention the tree would live on after us, containing the record of time that my family and the tree had shared. The thought stayed with me for the rest of the evening.

In the last few days at my grandfather's house, I made an effort to collect the photos that had significance to me. I collected old scraps of paper, Christmas cards, and pinecones and fallen branches from the tree. Still unsure what I was going to do with them, I mailed them back to myself in Greensboro. When I got back a week later, the box was waiting for me at the front door. I found the pinecones beautiful as objects but wondered how I could use them. I had remembered a few months prior a friend had shown me how to make charcoal. After some thought, I decided that I would turn the branches and pinecones I had collected into something I could draw with.

Making charcoal requires extreme heat to reduce organic material to pure carbon. My friend and I placed the material from the tree into two sealed metal cans and buried them almost entirely in the flame. Steam shot out from the cans as the heat began to evaporate the moisture from the wood inside, releasing the essence of the tree into the air.

This visit home was the inspiration for my installation in the Weatherspoon museum entitled *Family Tree*. It consists of three suspended drawings on white paper and twelve sealed canning jars on a wooden wall mounted shelf that contain the hand made charcoal. Each drawing includes two images that are separated by the thickness of the paper. The outward facing image is taken from a photo I took of the tree during my recent visit home and is repeated on the front of each drawing. The second image, located on the unexposed side of the paper, is taken from old family photos including the tree. Each

drawing is suspended in front of a wall mounted light that is programmed to slowly fade on and off. At first, the drawings appear identical. As the light comes on, the secondary image on the back side of the paper slowly becomes visible through the front side causing an overlapping of both images to occur. The secondary image then slowly fades out of view as the light goes off.

The drawings in the installation are stenciled. Each stencil was then placed on the surface of the paper and sprayed with adhesive. When the powdered charcoal was brushed over the papers surface the image became visible. By using stencils and adhesive, I could replace the negative spaces of the black and white photograph with the remains of the tree, fusing the ephemera of the tree and my family together.

The installation as a whole functions much in the way that memory does. Most of us collect photographs and keepsakes from important people and places throughout our lives. Revisiting these places, photos or objects recalls a collection of memories to our thoughts. We are able to access multiple memories simultaneously and we can be taken back momentarily to those people and places within our minds. They live on through our memory of them.

CHAPTER IV

FAMILY HOME

Photos are not the only things that trigger memory. Objects also hold a great deal of importance in the act of remembering. Even something as mundane as a handwritten letter, greeting card, or lock of hair I find significant enough to be saved, its importance elevated to new-found significance. I have always valued these things as important. Because of this I have numerous collections of birthday and Christmas cards, handwritten lists and notes, and other keepsakes of the loved ones throughout my life. When my grandmother passed away I was allowed to keep a lock of her hair and have worn it in a locket around my neck ever since. I began researching the use of hair as keepsake. During the Victorian era the hair of deceased loved ones and heads of state was considered very precious and was often used to create jewelry and wall hangings for mourning and remembrance. In different eras hair was a popular item that was passed between lovers as a token of love and adoration. Hair is also coded with genetic information that is specific to each person. People within family groups share portions of this coding.

I began collecting my hair and that of my family members about two years ago. I had in mind the idea of a single image that would somehow signify what brought us all together. *Family Home* was the result. I chose the reference photograph of my grandparents' house. The image is created by placing the collected combination of all of

our hair, cut down in to small pieces, sandwiched between two pieces of glass, at once allowing the viewer to see the image of the house and the space directly behind it in the gallery.

The word “home” often refers to a fixed architectural structure that is lived in. This used to be my feelings toward my grandparents’ house when I was younger. It was a place where family came together; where it was possible to feel safe and comfortable. This idea changed after my grandmother’s death. Our family stopped coming home and we began communicating more often than not through phone calls and cards in the mail. I began to realize that for me, my idea of “home” had actually been the strength of the relationships within my family. The people that I felt close to gave me that feeling of comfort and security, not the house itself. By combining the collected hair I was bringing my family together once again in the only way permitted by our collective physical distance. The project opened an avenue of communication between us and allowed my family to participate in the making of my work. The idea of outside participation has become a reoccurring process for me that I hope to further explore.

CHAPTER V

IN THE END

Growing up we didn't have much. Money was always tight, and lack of it made life very challenging at times. But we always had each other for comfort and support. My parents are very special people. I grew up admiring the love that they had for me and my sister, as well as for one another. No matter what struggle we faced, it only seemed to further solidify the strength of their relationship. I feel so blessed to have grown up with parents who so deeply love one another. Both my mother and my father now live with disabilities and the commitment that I made to my education has made it difficult to visit my parents as much as I would like. I had been searching for a way that I could connect with them in a more intimate method than phone calls and facebook messages can provide.

In March of this year I sent my parents fourteen disposable cameras. Both of my parents were asked to independently take one photo an hour every hour that they were awake for one week. At the end of that week the cameras were sent back to me and a set of photo books entitled *Apart/Together* were produced from the resulting images. The books serve to represent seven days in the lives of my mother and father. The books provide a glimpse in to the everyday routines that my parents have, but furthermore they make apparent the bond that mother and father share.

By openly sharing my personal history and experiences of loss and love, my hope is that the work transcends beyond my singular view of the world. Everyone has a personal history that is unique and individual. Although they are unique, I believe there is a connection that can be found through our collective human experience. These shared human experiences have provided me with endless inspiration that I will continue to examine in the years to come.

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APPENDIX OF IMAGES



The Presence of Absence, Cut photos and wooden pegs, 2014.



Family/Tree, Installation view, handmade charcoal, canning jars, three suspended drawings with light boxes, 2014/2015.



Family/Home, Hair from my siblings, parents, aunts, uncles and cousins, wooden frame, 2015.



Apart/Together, Installation view, photo books, bookends, plaque, 2015.



Apart/Together (detail).